



The nest of Schlegel's Asity *Philepitta schlegeli*

Frank Hawkins

Schlegel's Asity is a member of the endemic Malagasy subfamily Philepittinae, part of the Broadbill family Eurylaimidae¹. The subfamily includes two members of the genus *Neodrepanis*, strongly convergent on sunbirds. It also includes two species in the genus *Philepitta* (both understorey frugivores) and are reminiscent of green broadbills *Calyptomena* and *Pseudocalyptomena*. The Velvet Asity *P. castanea* is widespread and fairly common in eastern Malagasy rain forest^{2,3}, but Schlegel's Asity is poorly known and, in recent years, rarely seen. It has been recorded from a large area of western Madagascar^{2,3}, the Sambirano rain forest^{2,3,4} as far south as near Tsimañana⁵ (20°18'S, 44°40'E) and Ankazoabo³. Outside the Sambirano rain forest region, it occurs only in gallery forest in river valleys, where its distribution is patchy and it may be difficult to find,⁴ and humid fringe forests in limestone massifs, where it may be more common^{3,4,5}.

In Namoroka Strict Nature Reserve, Province of Mahajanga, north-western Madagascar (16°25'S, 45°20'E), on 15 October 1993, Aly Hassanal, Lala Jean Rakotoniaina, Merline Rasoharimalala, Don Reid, Patrick de Valois and I found a pair of Schlegel's Asity building a nest in a small (c10ha) forest patch surrounded by savanna, 1km from a larger area forest. The nest was half-built, suspended over a clear area from beneath a 4.5m high, 6cm diameter branch and made of pieces of moss and loose bark held together with spiders' webs. The birds had used leaf strips to build the nest frame and strips about 10cm long to hold the frame to the branch. The frame was in the form of an oval, about 20cm tall, into which both adult birds were weaving spiders'-webs and bark collected from shrubs nearby. Although not complete, it was clear that the nest would take the form of a suspended pear, with an entrance hole towards the top.

We observed the male display to the female, perching next to her, drooping his wings, fluffing up breast feathers and lifting his tail so that it almost touched his rump feathers. During this display he called very quietly, a series of sibilant squeaks. Later, when we returned to the nest, a young or partially moulted male was perched about 30cm from the adult pair. The

second male's plumage showed a mixture of adult male and female characters, and had a half-sized wattle. After a few minutes, the adult male attacked the second male; they fought in the air and then on the ground for a few seconds before the second male flew off.

The dimensions, materials, position and overall structure Velvet Asity's nests are in general very similar to those of the Schlegel's Asity in Namoroka^{3,4}. The nest of the Wattled Sunbird-Asity *Neodrepanis coruscans* is very similar to that of Velvet Asity³. The nest of African Green Broadbill *Pseudocalyptomena graueri* is also similar but more spherical, while those of the African *Smitbornis* broadbills tend to be more elongated, (often twice as long as broad), often with long trailing masses of material hanging beneath⁶. Other members of the Eurylaimidae have similar pendant, near-spherical nests⁷. Similarities between the nests of *Philepitta* and *P. graueri*, rather than with those of *Smitbornis*, may reflect the close relationship of the Philepittinae to the African Green Broadbill in particular¹.

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White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*, first occurrence in the Malagasy region

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On 4 November 1992 N. D. Hunter and I were birding at Fairview Estate, Mahé, Seychelles. Low cloud cover had brought down many Seychelles Swiftlets *Collocalia elaphra* and while watching these we suddenly realised that there was more than one species of swift present. Among the Swiftlets was a much larger, chunky swift which, as it came nearer, was clearly a needletail *Hirundapus* sp. Subsequent prolonged views from various positions and angles established that there were two individuals present. Although they ranged over a considerable area they were often in view simultaneously, and on several occasions flashed past us at very close range.

Description

A large, very thickset swift with long, broad-based wings with very pointed tips. It had a fairly short, square-ended tail, sometimes closed to give a tapered rear-end effect. It flew by gliding most of the time with wings slightly bowed in anhedral position, occasionally generating speed with short bursts of rapid wingbeats.

Upper parts: crown, nape, hind-neck and upper mantle blackish-brown, fading into pale greyish-brown on mantle and back forming a saddle, darkening to dark brown/blackish on rump and tail.

Wings: blackish, flight feathers slightly paler than coverts. Dark greenish gloss occasionally apparent on wings and, much harder to see, on crown (dependent on angle of flight and light).

Under parts: chin and throat whitish, sometimes hard to see. White under tail-coverts tapering forwards onto lower flanks formed a very prominent white 'horse-shoe' under rear end. Breast, belly and remainder of flanks dark brown.

The White-throated Needletail breeds in the Eastern Palearctic, from central and southern Siberia to Japan, China and Taiwan, the northern Himalayas and Assam. The northern, nominate race is wholly migratory and winters in Australia. It is an irregular visitor to New Zealand and stragglers have also reached Fiji and Macquarie Island. It has been recorded as a vagrant in the Western Palearctic with 15 records up to 1991 from Britain and Ireland (May-July), Finland (April-May), Malta (November) and Norway (May).

The Seychelles Bird Records Committee has accepted this record which constitutes the first occurrence of this species in the Seychelles, as well as for the whole Afrotropical and Malagasy Region. ☉

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White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*
by Colin Towe

